

VZCZCXYZ0014  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBS #1558/01 1301204  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 101204Z MAY 07  
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5320  
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1531  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1563  
RUEHLE/AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG 8326  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1887  
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 8440  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 7946

UNCLAS BRUSSELS 001558

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: BELGIUM'S 2007 ELECTION ? WHERE THE PARTIES  
STAND ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES

Foreign Affairs Are No Election Affair  
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¶1. (U) In 1983 some 300,000 people marched through the streets of Brussels to protest the deployment American cruise missiles in Belgium. It was the largest protest registered since World War II, and almost brought down government of Wilfred Martens. Despite predictions that the issue would have an impact on the 1985 general elections, the prognosticators were proven wrong. Martens, a Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V ? Christian Democratic and Flemish), consolidated his position with a solid victory. Every federal election since has demonstrated the point that foreign affairs and security issues play only a limited direct role.

¶2. (U) The same situation exists in the post-election government formation period. With foreign affairs and defense policy discussions generally taking place at the very end of the formation talks, the parties generally are ready to jettison deeply held convictions to strike a deal and be sworn in by the King. The tradition of compromise is particularly true on the left, where Belgium's socialist foreign ministers have regularly shown themselves ready to break with party orthodoxy on even the most controversial of issues, including NATO's cruise missile dual-track decision of 1979, the cruise missile deployment of 1985, the 1990 Gulf War, and the current conflict in Iraq.

A Consensus Builder  
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¶3. (U) Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht (Open VLD ? the Flemish Liberal party) is the primary reason why 2007 will be no exception to the longstanding tradition of low public interest in foreign affairs. Since taking office in 2004, De Gucht has worked assiduously to lower the temperatures that rose during the tenure of his predecessor Louis Michel, a Francophone Liberal (MR), who liked hard talking and generating controversy. De Gucht has managed to create a consensus on most issues within the current four-party coalition of Liberals and Socialists. Even some opposition leaders have acknowledged publicly that they have no quarrel with the way De Gucht has handled his assignment.

The Great Flahaut Show

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¶4. (SBU) There is, however, much less consensus regarding the role of Defense Minister Andre Flahaut. A Francophone socialist (PS ? Socialist Party), Flahaut is a perennial bogeyman for many, notably in the Flemish press and in the CD&V. The verbal confrontations in Parliament between Flahaut and the opposition CD&V floor leader were among the rare moments of parliamentary fireworks during the past four years.

¶5. (SBU) Flahaut has held the defense portfolio for eight years, much longer than any of his predecessors. And he has proven to be a man with a mission. Since taking office, Flahaut has set himself the goal of reducing the armed forces from an initial level of 40,000 to 27,000 by the year 2016. While there is a wide consensus in Belgium that the forces should concentrate on peacekeeping, Flahaut has focused on the humanitarian aspect of peacekeeping. Because of this emphasis on humanitarian work, Flahaut and his generals have opted to purchase light equipment, a decision that renders peacekeeping in high-risk areas increasingly less feasible. Moreover, because of financial and material restrictions, Belgium finds it difficult to send more than 1,000 troops on overseas operations at any given time.

#### Future Implications

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¶6. (SBU) Belgium's defense budget cuts are a clear reflection of the power of the two Socialist Parties, the PS on the French side and the SP.A (i.e., the

Flemish Socialists) on the Flemish side. SP.A Party President Johan Vande Lanotte has already opined that there is room for further reductions in defense outlays. He even has stated that in an ideal world the development assistance budget should be bigger than the defense budget. The Flemish Socialist leader also strongly opposes most out-of-area operations at NATO (Afghanistan is the exception) and, absent specific UN endorsement, Belgian involvement in the broader war on terrorism. The party is once more giving public support to demands for the removal of all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and, in a bid to gain votes from Belgium's powerful peace movement, was a vocal backer of legislation to ban submunitions.

#### The European Subterfuge

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¶7. (U) Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (Open VLD) has traveled Europe pleading for a "European Defense alternative." (Verhofstadt uses the phrase elastically to cover, depending on the occasion, everything from Eurocorps, to European-oriented procurement, to a more formal European armed force.) In this, he is reflecting a broad consensus among all Belgian political parties that Europe must place a higher priority on development of its own capabilities in everything from defense policymaking, to procurement, and even the establishment of an actual European armed force. (It is unclear how long this consensus would last if the parties were asked to respond to a concrete proposal.) Verhofstadt's Open VLD is willing to commit more resources to a slimmer and better equipped force, a view shared by the Christian Democrats on both sides of the linguistic border. There also is a consensus among the political parties on NATO being built on distinctive American and European pillars, and on NATO-led peacekeeping missions taking place under the United Nations umbrella.

#### The Bonus

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¶8. (U) Having been Prime Minister for eight years, Verhofstadt is attempting during the current electoral campaign to portray himself as a European statesman capable of putting the European Project back on the rails. He and his party are now pleading for an energetic attempt to salvage the concept of a federal Europe, with a European foreign minister, armed force, and qualified majority decision making. The Belgians have made clear they ultimately will follow whatever version of the constitutional treaty the Germans are able to fashion before the end of their Presidency in June, even as they push for Chancellor Merkel to go farther and faster. With small variations in tone and on immediate priorities, the other parties remain committed to a federal Europe, to support for EU expansion into the Balkans, and to gradual progress toward Turkish accession.

#### Chained to Congo and to Development Assistance

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¶9. (U) For all the energy and revenue Belgium has spent on Congo, the election manifestoes are rather brief on the subject. Politicians know that despite the persistence of sentimental bonds, the Belgian public views Congo as a lost cause. Despite this widely held belief, the Flemish and Francophone approaches to the issue differ markedly. Foreign Minister De Gucht, a Flemish speaker, has frequently delivered blunt lectures to Congolese leaders on their failings. However, Defense Minister Flahaut, a Francophone, has sought to charm them with kind words. Only the Francophone parties plead for intensifying Belgium's efforts in the Great Lakes region. The Francophone Liberals in the MR even believe Belgium should find the means to upgrade Belgium's role within MONUC.

¶10. (U) Most of the party manifestoes promise also for the umpteenth time to upgrade development assistance to 0.7 percent of GDP, and to spread the development effort more evenly over aid-recipient countries.

Similar promises ? and similar failure to achieve much ? have preceded and followed earlier elections.

#### Lofty Ideals

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¶11. (U) The two Green parties traditionally have radical foreign affairs platforms, invariably critical of the U.S. As during past elections, they plead for reformation of the WTO, IMF, World Bank and UN, all with the goal of giving more political clout within these organizations to third world countries. The two ecological parties state also that Belgium should take a leading role in efforts to conclude an arms trade treaty and an international treaty banning sub-munitions. The Green parties oppose NATO's role in operations outside the European theatre absent a UN endorsement, and want the removal of nuclear weapons from Europe. The Green Parties also support renegotiation of the 1971 Line of Communications Treaty signed between NATO and Belgium. The Greens favor closer EU ties with Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union, while pleading for a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state. (While the Palestinians can count on a certain residual sympathy from many on the left, most parties are more circumspect and the Prime Minister's Open VLD is a strong supporter of Israel.)

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